

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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PLATTE RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE PROPOSED

Information on the proposal to establish a new national wildlife refuge in Nebraska was presented to the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission at its meeting on May 11, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. No Commission action was proposed or taken.

The proposed Platte River National Wildlife Refuge would lie entirely within the floodplain of the Platte River. It would involve segments of remaining wetland habitat in 10 counties, on a 180-mile stretch of the river. The refuge segments would vary in width from $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to 4 miles.

The area encompasses habitat extremely important for a host of migratory birds, including white-fronted geese, the endangered whooping cranes, and the lesser sandhill cranes.

Several years ago the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had proposed to buy a solid block of 15,000 acres of river bottom. This proposal met with opposition from local landowners who suggested some alternative approach be found, noting that many local farming practices are compatible with waterfowl and crane use. Since the main purpose of this refuge is to preserve threatened habitat rather than for extensive management of habitat, a unique combination of fee purchase and easements was developed. The concept is based upon a "willing seller" program. The easement which has been developed will protect wet meadows and sandbars from conversion to other uses while, at the same time, allowing landowners to retain fee title and carry on normal farming practices.

This project is designed to ensure the availability of sufficient spring migration staging areas for waterfowl, sandhill cranes, and whooping cranes.

Each spring, on their migration north, migrating ducks, geese, and cranes pause along the Platte River Valley resting, courting, and building up their body condition in preparation for the final push north to breeding grounds in Northern United States, Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. The condition of the birds upon reaching their nesting areas significantly affects their reproductive potential and is critical to the maintenance of a healthy breeding population for all migrating species.

Ducks and geese numbering close to 1 million annually use the Platte Valley and adjacent wetland basins. It is a major spring staging area for 70 to 90 percent of the mid-continent white-fronted goose population. The other species that are included in the large concentrations are Canada geese, mallards, pintails, and other waterfowl.

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The Platte River is assuming an increasingly important role each year as wetland habitat is lost to encroaching agricultural and commercial development. Concentrated waterfowl populations on the remaining wetlands has precipitated disease outbreaks in 1975 and 1976. Approximately 25,000 ducks and geese died from fowl cholera in 1975. Nine endangered whooping cranes landed in an infected basin in April 1975 but were successfully hazed to the Platte River where the flowing water lessens the impacts of the disease.

The area has a long history of use by endangered whooping cranes during their spring and fall migrations from the Texas gulf coast to Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. During migration, Nebraska has more recorded sightings than the remainder of the States combined. A recent computation of confirmed sightings in Nebraska revealed that 77 percent of those recorded between 1922 and 1975 were on or near the Platte River.

Annually, 80 to 100 percent of the mid-continent population of sandhill cranes gather in the "Big Bend Region" of the Platte River Valley in the spring. During the 2-month period the birds are concentrated in the Platte River Valley, they utilize three general types of habitat: (1) shallow submerged sandbars in broad stretches of rivers as night roosting sites; (2) wet meadows, particularly those near roosting areas, for feeding, loafing, courtship, and as secondary roosts; (3) corn and milo stubble as primary feeding sites. The first two of these habitat types are the ones in short supply and most in danger of being eliminated. Waterfowl species use essentially these same habitat types.

Scientists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Sandhill Crane Committee, and the International Crane Foundation believe preservation of the Platte River habitat is necessary for the survival of this sandhill crane population.

Bald and some golden eagles are also found along the river during late fall and winter. Approximately 90 eagles were counted in January 1976 along the Platte River.

Over the next few months the Fish and Wildlife Service will be informing people through meetings and the media about this new concept of encouraging preservation of important habitat by private landowners through the sale of their development rights. Coordination of the planning for the refuge will be continued with all organizations having an interest in future development on the Platte River.

The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission is a statutory body called for under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act to approve land acquisitions made under the Act with duck stamp funds. Current members are the Secretary of Interior as Chairman, the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Transportation, Senator Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma, Senator Quentin Burdick of North Dakota, Representative Silvio Conte of Massachusetts, and Representative John Dingell of Michigan.